



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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CONGLETON BRANCH.—On Wednesday, May 16th, an inaugural meeting was held in the Church Schoolroom, Mr. Arthur Solly in the chair, when Miss Forsyth gave an address explaining the aims and objects of the P.N.E.U., and was followed by the Lady Isabel Margesson, who gave a brief account of the work of the Belgravia Branch and the Natural History Club. Owing to the inclement weather the attendance was small, but a resolution was passed that a branch of the P.N.E.U. be forthwith formed, several members of the audience giving their names as subscribers. The Secretary and Committee have not yet been definitely nominated.

MACCLESFIELD BRANCH.—On Thursday, the 17th May, a Meeting was held in the Grammar School, by kind permission of Mr. Wilmot, the Head Master, who took the Chair, to consider the advisability of forming a Branch of the P.N.E.U. Miss Forsyth addressed the Meeting and explained the Principles of the "New Education," and the aims and objects of the Parents' Union. Lady Isabel Margesson also spoke in support of Miss Forsyth, and after a short but interesting discussion, it was proposed that a Branch of the P.N.E.U. be formed, whereupon twenty members of the audience signified their willingness to join the Union, and several of these volunteered to serve on a provisional Committee, to consider future plans. A letter from Miss Philips, Head Mistress of the High School, was read, expressing her regret at being unavoidably absent, and her cordial support of the prospective Branch.

Hon. Local Secs. are requested to send to the undersigned, without delay, reports of all matters of interest connected with their branches, written on one side of the paper only, also 20 copies of any prospectuses or other papers they may print.

HENRY PERRIN, HON. ORG. SEC.,
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LONDON, N.W.

THE PARENTS' REVIEW

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE
OF HOME-TRAINING AND CULTURE.

"Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life."

CHILD TRAINING.

BY A. S. ACLAND.

CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS, I.

"All men naturally desire to know . . ."
Thomas à Kempis.

EVERYONE who has been much with little children, will have noticed what a large part asking questions, and receiving answers to them, plays in their lives. Sooner or later, sometimes by fits and starts, sometimes without ceasing they seem to find a peculiar pleasure in questioning their elders.

Sometimes these questions come from a real desire for knowledge, sometimes from nervousness. Sometimes again, a child asks endless questions and listens eagerly for answers, and really enjoys receiving information, while the same child, if it liked, could quite well give the answer itself. Then, sometimes, children question from a desire to provoke or to "pose" their elders, or again to find an opening for disobedience, or for delay in carrying out instructions. There are, too, children who delight in argument for its own sake, and these are always very difficult to deal with.

All these children are constantly questioning, constantly waiting for answers, and it may be useful to some if we look into the matter a little closely and see whether we may not arrive at some interesting and helpful conclusions. It is impossible to watch children at all closely, either

in the families of friends, or in public places, like sea-side resorts, parks, omnibuses and the like, without realizing how great the need is for more thought on the whole matter of answering their questions. If we notice, we shall see how, if they are not, as too often happens, treated simply as tiresome, they are often greeted with ridicule. The questions they ask are very possibly repeated and handed round as a sort of excellent joke, and the children are either covered with confusion, or much puffed up with pride with their own cleverness. Even if, however, there is patience enough to stop the rebuke, or self-restraint enough to stop the ridicule, conscientiousness may take the form of giving careful answers to every question the child may choose to put, without serious consideration as to whether that is really the best way to help its mental development.

Children's questions are by no means so simple as they seem at first sight. They may even be sorted out so as to fall under various heads, each of which requires different treatment. But, if we take the most obvious of these heads first, and consider it carefully, we shall perhaps arrive at some principles which may help to throw light upon all.

Let us then first take the questions of little children which begin with "Why."

We shall easily recognize the following conversation as typical.*

CHILD. What is that horse doing?

MOTHER. He is trotting.

CHILD. Why is he trotting?

MOTHER. Because he wants to get home fast.

CHILD. Why does he want to get home fast?

MOTHER. Because he is tired.

CHILD. Why is he tired?

MOTHER. Because he has been a long way.

CHILD. Why has he been a long way?

* * * * *

It is interesting to notice that in most children this asking "Why," begins quite suddenly, and the first thing we have to realize is that it is not meaningless, but is an indication of a certain stage of mental development.

* These and other questions in these papers are quoted from life. Any reader will find it easy to supply others from personal experience.

To begin with, we notice that asking "why" is a very different sort of thing from asking "what is that called?" or "where are you going?" The fact is, that this form of question indicates the beginning of conscious thought in the child's mind. Hitherto the little one has probably been storing its memory with facts. Now the idea has dawned upon it that behind facts are reasons. It sees that all actions have a cause somewhere, and it begins to want to know what are those reasons and what are those causes. It is this process of conscious thought which makes this stage so particularly interesting and important. It is one of those things which make the age of about three years old so delightful, and it is this thinking and reasoning power which may make the child, in a short time, rather more difficult to deal with than it has been heretofore.

From this fact (that the child is just beginning to think in earnest), it follows plainly, that the child's power of thought, its way of thinking and its perseverance in thinking, depend largely on how we treat its first attempts.

If we were to knock a baby down every time it tried to get upon its feet we should expect him to be a long time in learning to walk. If we always carried a child we should not expect his legs to be very strong. Again, what results should we get if, when he began to try his feet, we were to insist on his doing nothing but stand? In the one case, obviously, his legs would be injured from under and the other from over-work. The mind of a young child would seem to require judicious treatment quite as much as his legs. We have to be on our guard on the one hand not to stop or hinder his thinking powers, and on the other not to strain them. How best shall we avoid these two dangers?

A little serious consideration will, I venture to think, lead us to the conclusion that both these dangers are best avoided by, as far as possible, never giving a direct answer to a question which begins with "why," and this for several reasons.†

It appears evident, first, that if we promptly answer all the questions that are put to us, we are taking upon ourselves the work of doing the child's thinking for it. He will soon learn

† We are speaking of course, as we said above, only of little children. There are questions beginning with "why" which come later which mark a very advanced and thoughtful mind, but even these children are not perhaps always best helped by a prompt, and more or less cut and dried, answer to their difficulties.

this, and how do we know when he will begin to think again? Later on, when he is learning arithmetic, and we find that he makes foolish blunders and answers quite at random, we said indignantly, "You are not thinking." Very often, if we notice, we shall find that these mistake-making children are among the greatest askers of more or less trivial questions, and have been in need of a more or less "bracing" treatment. The fact is we must confess that ordinary human nature is much inclined to be lazy, as Mr. Thring says "mind is the Prince of Shirks."† Little children whose questions constantly begin with "why" may be safely treated as being in danger of falling unconsciously into a bad habit. It is at all events plain that if we answer all the "whys" we shall help to make those, who are so active-minded, into lazy-minded children.

Secondly: we must consider that a little one, when it begins to ask "why," has—though it has come to wish for new ideas—very little power to take them in, or to express them. It may want to know the springs of action, but these will often be so far beyond its understanding that our answers may cause considerable perplexity. We may, and probably shall, if we are not careful, tend to overload the memory and over-tax the imagination. Instead of helping the child, we may leave only confusion behind. For one thing, it is not easy to get a grown-up person's perceptions and thoughts into a child's mind, and for another, our language is different to theirs. We shall find it almost impossible, for example, to use, in our explanations, those words only which are in the little child's very limited vocabulary.

Thirdly: we must consider that when questions beginning with a "why" are freely answered, we are running a great risk of letting the child drift into never asking anything further of us, and in this way getting his intelligence stunted. A question like "How many legs has an insect got?" is worth answering; that shows a real desire for information. But, "Why does this horse trot?" (which was asked me once by a child of about six years old), comes from one of three things; it must come either from mere vacancy of mind, or from a desire to be always talking and important, or, as I

† Reference p. 151,—Address of Edward Thring.

believe it did in this case, from a bad habit of asking, and, what is more, of receiving answers to trivial questions.

When staying at the seaside not long ago, I heard a remarkable instance of the sort of thing which comes when children are indulged in this kind of way. Near me on the pier were seated two gentlemen in earnest conversation. A great boy of about ten years old was with them. "Papa," he began, bursting in upon their talk, "Papa, why are the people going to look over the side of the pier?" I listened with interest for the answer. It came in a patient, weary voice, "They are going to look at something which interests them." The curious thing was that neither parent nor child seemed dissatisfied, nor did the boy go to find out what was happening, though he had thought nothing of breaking in upon his father's talk with his question.

If we are, then, to be so careful not to answer these questions, what shall we best do for children when they ask "why"?

Long ago I heard a little boy of about four years old very well treated. He had asked a visitor some foolish little question like, "Why did that bird fly?" and the visitor, who was a very wise man, asked him back, "Why not?" It was a very pregnant hint. Since then I have come to see that even before this age, even before three years old, a child is the better for being treated in this kind of way. The actual question of "why not" would puzzle these tiny things, and is perhaps not always suitable, but even when very young they will reply to "What do you think yourself?" and the answers to this are often most interesting. Perhaps the child says "Because he wants to," an answer in which there is more than meets the eye—the very springs themselves of "*desire*" and of "*will*." But sometimes the answer shows that before the question was asked the reason was formed in the little mind. Take an instance. A child of three years old, asked, "Why did that birdie fly?" She was told, "You tell me," and she at once answered back, "Because he thought there was more wormies on the other side." This illustration shows not only that the child's answer was ready, but how confusing it would have been to the little one if any other suggestion had been made to it.

It is very interesting to watch, when a child is treated in this way, how fast the questions improve in intelligence. Its mind, also, seems to get quieted as well as strengthened. Of

course the answers or the reasons given are sometimes wrong. But soon, very gently, we may venture to disagree, or very cautiously, perhaps by more questions, to put the matter in a truer light. But we can have no more valuable help towards training the child than its own answers to its own questions, because they enable us to judge so exactly of what is going on in the little one's mind.

Some may not agree with me that this treatment is quieting and soothing, but I have learned that it really is so. At all events it helps, because there is nothing "forcing" in it. The mind is not made to grow faster than it healthfully can. It is the danger of the opposite which makes it necessary to say, "very gently" and "very cautiously." Tiny children's memories for such things are very short, and we may do more harm by forcing them, unduly, to take a right view, than we shall by leaving them alone, for the present, with an incorrect one. Later on we may take an opportunity to put obviously wrong ideas right, by some object lesson given at a fitting moment, it can then be done without argument. Arguing is fatal, because children only remain more firmly fixed in their own ideas by an argument. They will tend to remember what they have said themselves instead of what has been said to them. Besides, arguing with their elders is a very bad habit.

Some fear may be felt that children, treated in the way suggested, may not feel encouraged to ask us any questions at all.

This sounds very reasonable. Of course we want to encourage the child. The question, however, really is, how is this best done? If we consider, I think we shall see that by referring the child back to itself we show a respect for its mind which is the best encouragement we can give. We encourage it to find reasons and to state them accurately, and we thus increase its sense of the value of reasons. Moreover there is no reason whatever for refusing to answer all questions; that would be making a hard and cruel despot of a rule which is only meant to be an intelligent helper. Of course, as a child grows older we shall modify and supplement this treatment; we shall find that we shall often get an opportunity to help the child out with its thoughts and to seek more diligently for reasons. In this way we shall help to increase its enjoyment, and we shall teach it to look with pleasure to us for mental help and companionship.

There is one more point which must be dealt with, and that is the fear which may arise that not answering such questions will detract from the dignity of our position in the child's mind. It is of the utmost importance that he should thoroughly respect his elders; but the question is, will the child think less well of us if we do not answer its "whys"? Is it not likely that, being able to drag any answer out of us at any time, about anything, will give the child a sense of power over us which is not at all good for it? Moreover, if we answer all its "whys," what is to prevent us from, some time or other, answering them foolishly? How can we answer "Why does this horse trot?" so brilliantly as to fill the child with respect?

It may be asked what is to be done for a child who asks such things as "Why does father go away from us when he loves us so much?" The question is beyond its power to answer, and when asked back, "What do you think?" it may say, thoughtfully, "I don't know." What must be done for this child!

It must be helped to know.

The Educator will perhaps ask questions as to what is known about the matter beforehand, and will open up the ground round about, till the child is prepared to give an answer. In this case, it would be, probably, "Because he wishes to see others whom he loves, and who love him," or, "Because he has work he must do." But when the answer is given it must be not in the teacher's, but in the child's own words, or no good has been done to the child's mind.

Then again, we must take another case,—of a child perhaps very quick to suggest reasons, but who asks, for instance, gazing into the fire,—“Why does the fire burn?” What can we best do? It is of very little use asking back, “What do you think?” because the child is evidently puzzling its brains already. So puzzled is it, perhaps, that it would with difficulty grasp a prompt explanation. But there it will have several things to remember about the fire. The child will have seen it laid in the morning,—first the paper or shavings, then the sticks or fire-lighter, and then the coals, or wood blocks. The striking of the match, too, on the box it has seen, and how one thing caught fire after another. We may get the child, by questioning, to tell us about this, and to say how “hot” the flame was. Soon it will see that the “hot”

flame made by rubbing the match on the box began the whole thing, and that so long as we go on putting the right things in contact with that heat, the fire will go on burning. This will probably be enough for the present. The idea of heat communicated from one thing to another will become at home in the child's mind, and bye-and-bye we can show how the things burnt with less and more difficulty according to their nature. But we must be very careful not to let the child think it knows all about the matter from any remembering, or grouping, of simple facts. It must realize that wise men have spent much time in understanding the laws of these things, and that it will have to wait if it wants to know "all about" it. Books will tell them later on.

What we want to help the child to acquire is receptiveness,—a wish to find out things thoroughly, not a great and early-made store of undigested lumps of knowledge, which will spoil all chance of a healthy mental appetite in the future.

There are two dangers which we must be prepared to consider. The child may see that its questions interest us overmuch; and again, another danger, that its thoughts and reasons will be in themselves so quaint, and put into such funny words, that those who hear them will find it difficult to keep from laughter. Children dread ridicule; they also very soon get self-absorbed. Priggishness is more easily acquired than lost. Then there are ourselves to consider. Shall we tend to get priggish if we are always working with a plan in our heads? But, as to all these things, "forewarned is forearmed." Plenty of the good merry old games,—games which are all fun and no thinking, such as "Puss in the Corner," "Blind Man's Buff," and "Tickey, Tickey, Touch-wood," are all excellent protectors from priggishness and self-absorption. Plenty of occupation for little fingers, throws thinking into safe directions. As to ourselves, are we the worse if we know how long to boil the potatoes if we want to cook a dinner? or how to keep books if we want to go into business? Why then should we be the worse for having plans upon which to deal with children's questions? As Mr. Thring says, "How can they help who know not how to work?"

From our consideration of this one form of question, we have seen how much may be done to help or to hinder the child's free development. Another time we may go on to consider other forms of questions which so constantly come before us.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD.

BY SEYMOUR G. TREMENHEERE, H.M.I.

I WAS once asked by an amiable hostess, who rashly assumed me to be something better than a bachelor, how many children I had? I replied that I did not know exactly, but it was somewhere about 40,000. You probably have smaller families, consequently your experience of children will be of a different character to mine. Yours must be a narrow knowledge, because it is based on a few examples only; but it is very intimate and thorough as far as it goes. The professional educator's experience is much shallower, but on the other hand much broader, and affords therefore a safer basis for generalisation. The science of education needs both sorts of experience. There is much that we can learn from you, provided you study your children with sympathetic and intelligent observation, but without undue prepossessions; but there is also something which you may learn from us. All parents are of necessity educators. They may delegate their duties in part to paid substitutes; but, even were it desirable, it is not possible for them to place their responsibilities wholly on other shoulders. In the first place, there is one whole department of life in which the parent's influence must be infinitely stronger than that of the schoolmaster: I mean the training of character; and, in the second place, the child is not in the hands of the specialist from beginning to end. There are at least the years before the child is old enough to go to school, and there are the holidays. Even if no formal lessons are given in the pre-school period, the child nevertheless learns more in the first five years of its life than in the next fifty. It learns to walk, to talk, to use its various senses and to interpret their multitudinous evidence. Here alone is an immense field for the parent to cultivate. As to the training of character, the home influence must always predominate for several reasons: first, because